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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000534

DEPT FOR AF/EX

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TAGS: PGOV PINS PREF ER ET  
SUBJECT: OLF CHAIRMAN SURVIVES "COUP ATTEMPT"

REF: ASMARA 334

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Asmara-based chairman of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Daawud Ibsa, claims to have consolidated control of the party after a failed takeover attempt by General Kamal Galchuu, a deserter from the Ethiopian army who reputedly wanted to launch the OLF on a more militant trajectory. End Summary.

¶2. (C) General Kamal's Abortive Putsch

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Following a July rally in Minneapolis at which young Oromos characterized the OLF executive committee as "tired paper tigers," former Brigadier General Kamal Galchuu attempted to wrest control of the party leadership from Chairman Daawud. Kamal, who deserted from the Ethiopian army in 2006, was for a time the Isaias regime's poster child against "the TPLF dictatorship." Despite headlines in the Oromo media such as "Successful Takeover of the OLF," the executive committee affirmed Daawud's leadership in August, a decision endorsed by the central committee in October. The chairman also admitted that a number of OLF cadres in "southern Oromia" quit the party and some even defected to other movements when Kamal's bid failed. Overall, Daawud allowed, around 10% of the party's 60,000 official members supported Kamal, who remains at liberty in Asmara.

¶3. (C) The OLF Military Effort

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Daawud claimed the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) had "thousands and thousands" of recruits, but was hamstrung by lack of supplies. He said the OLA had mounted some significant guerrilla actions on "the eastern front in the past two to three weeks," but being headquartered in Eritrea, which was not contiguous to Oromia, created OLF logistical and command and control difficulties. The chairman maintained that despite the armed struggle, the OLF was committed to democracy. He provided no detail on any potential Eritrean support to the OLF.

¶4. (SBU) Oromos Feel Shortchanged by UNHCR

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Daawud, along with the OLF's political director and information officer, expressed frustration at lack of cooperation from UNHCR in obtaining refugee status for Oromo exiles. The OLF leaders estimated there were 30,000 Oromo refugees in Kenya, some of whom had received refugee status but were denied settlement in the U.S. because of a DHS ruling that the OLF was a terrorist organization. (Daawud earlier said the OLF has renounced terrorism, see ref.)

Approximately 10,000 Oromos languish in Khartoum with no UNHCR support, the OLF leaders claimed. In Eritrea, there are reportedly 200 Oromo refugees near Assab who were "kicked out" of Djibouti and are not supported by UNHCR. A further 60 to 70 Oromos live in Asmara, they stated. The OLF leaders asked the ambassador about potential U.S. refugee status for the wives and children of OLF executive committee members resident in Asmara.

¶5. (C) Lencho Leta's Stalled Initiative

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Respected Oromo exile Lencho Leta, along with Dima Nego and other elders, was scheduled to travel to Addis in October for talks with Ethiopian officials. The initiative of Oslo-based Lencho Leta is reportedly supported by the Netherlands, Norway, and Germany. Daawud claimed the postponed talks were not reconciliation negotiations approved by the OLF, but were merely to be discussions about establishing "cultural institutions." The OLF's political director is Lencho Leta's brother. The OLF leaders spoke with some concern about the recent arrest in Addis of the Secretary General of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement, a legal parliamentary party. While stating the two organizations are separate, Daawud said, "They are our brethren."

¶6. (C) Political Costs of Locating in Asmara?

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The ambassador asked if being based in the capital of Eritrea, a blood enemy of Ethiopia, bore a political price. Didn't the OLF risk being seen as lackeys of the Isaias regime? The chairman and political director answered that among the Oromo, there was no significant negative effect, but in building an alliance with other Ethiopian groups (particularly Amharas) there remained a suspicion and resentment toward Eritrea that constrained OLF efforts.

¶7. (C) COMMENT

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Many of the OLF's leaders are aging Protestants presiding over a rank and file that is largely young and Muslim, and who might have been attracted to General Kamal's more aggressive line. It is odd that the Eritrean government, always keen to stir up trouble in Ethiopia, didn't intervene to help General Kamal unseat the democratically oriented OLF leadership. One explanation might be that Daawud Ibsa led the OLF column that marched into Addis Ababa in 1991, along with other rebel groups supported by Isaias Afwerki's EPLF. Ties and loyalties established in "the Struggle" remain a paramount dynamic in Eritrean politics. Perhaps Isaias has a soft spot for his former OLF brother in arms. End Comment.

MCMULLEN